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ABSTRACT

In early-decision programs, high school students apply to their first-choice college and receive an admissions decision by December of their senior year. These programs are binding, meaning that if a student is accepted into a college through the early decision process, he or she must rescind applications to other colleges and forgo the chance to compare financial aid and enrollment packages from other institutions. This Digest reviews the literature on early-decision programs. Much of the current literature focuses on the negative aspects of the program. A major criticism is that the approach seems to favor students from upper middle-class backgrounds, especially those from affluent suburban schools. Early-decision applicants who are not accepted to their first-choice school may be greatly disappointed. Another controversial aspect of early decision is that colleges use the program to increase their rankings in "U.S. News & World Report" and other ranking publications. Several institutions have ended their early decision programs, and others plan to do so. It is too early to determine the fate of early decision, but there is clearly a movement afoot that advocates change in this admission policy. (Contains 13 references.) (SLD)

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# Early-Decision Programs

**Tamara Holub**

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**Early-Decision Programs**
*By Tamara Holub*

***Introduction***
In early-decision programs, high school students apply early to their first-choice college and receive an admissions decision by December of their senior year. These programs are binding, meaning that if a student is accepted to a college through the early-decision process, he/she must rescind all applications to other colleges, and sign a contract to attend the college granting early admission. By signing a binding contract, a student forfeits his/her chance to compare financial aid and enrollment packages from other institutions. Students are allowed to have only one early-decision application pending at any time (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2001).

***Early-Decision Versus Early-Action Programs***
Early-action is a similar, but non-binding, program. Students who apply through early action receive a response from the college ahead of regular decision applicants, and, in accordance with new guidelines set by the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), may apply to other colleges without restriction (NACAC, 2001). The number of both early-decision and early-action applicants has been steadily rising for the last decade (Fallows, 2001). About 270 colleges and universities offer early-decision programs (Loftus, 2002). According to a recent study by NACAC, of colleges surveyed that had either an early-decision or early-action program, 50 percent of institutions responding reported an increase in the number of early-decision applicants; 31 percent reported a decrease; and 19 percent reported no change ("NACAC Study," 2002). Eighty percent of institutions responding to the same survey reported an increase in the number of early-action applicants, and 20 percent reported no change ("NACAC Study," 2002).

***Positive Aspects of Early-Decision Programs***
The growing popularity of early decision has spurred debate among college administrators, high school counselors, parents, and students about the consequences of the program. Early decision benefits students who are certain which college they want to attend regardless of what financial aid might be available to them from other schools. Being accepted early also eliminates the stress associated with applying to multiple schools and maximizes the amount of time available for students to plan their new lives at a particular college.

***Criticisms of Early Decision-Programs***
Much of the current literature on early decision focuses on the negative aspects of the program. A major criticism of early decision is that it seems to favor students from upper middle-class backgrounds, especially those who attend private schools or public schools in affluent suburban districts (Toor, 2001). Rachel Toor, a former admissions counselor at Duke University, says:

> "The early program decision works together with other factors that reinforce class lines. The people whose parents can pay for elite private high schools, shell out additional thousands for 'independent college counselors,' visit campuses and meet with the 'right people,' and, yes, who know that applying early can give them a boost – they are clearly at an advantage" (Toor, 2001, p. B16).

Many college admissions counselors admit that students who apply early have a better chance of being accepted than students who apply through regular decision (See Loftus, 2002, p. 70). The favorable acceptance statistics across the board for early-decision admissions have influenced many high school students to feel that they have to apply early in order to maximize their chances of getting into a good college. A 2000 study of five years of admissions records from 14 selective colleges by Christopher Avery and colleagues at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government shows that this may be true (as cited in Fallows, 2001). Avery's study found that the competitive value of an early-decision application was equivalent to 100 SAT points more than a regular decision application (as cited in Fallows, 2001). Admission rates for early-decision applicants are higher than for regular-decision applicants. For example, in 2002, Johns Hopkins University admitted 59% of its early-decision applicants compared to 33% of its regular-decision applicants; the University of Pennsylvania admitted 38% of the early pool compared to 16% of the regular pool (Loftus, 2002, p. 70). Thus, students feel pressed to maximize their chances of getting into a school instead of taking the time to research schools and identify one or more offering a good fit. (Gerson, 1998, p.68)

Early decision may also have other negative consequences. Early-decision college applicants who are not accepted via the early-decision program may be greatly disappointed and discouraged. After submitting the application, some students entertain doubts about their choice to apply early and experience anxiety as a result. Some students may also receive deferrals from the early response, putting them in admissions limbo (Gerson, 1998, p. 68).

***Early-Decision Programs and College Rankings***

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Another controversial aspect of early decision is that colleges use the program to increase their rankings in *U.S. News & World Report's* "America's Best Colleges" (See Fallows, 2001; Ehrenberg, 2000). According to James Fallows, a former editor of *U.S. News & World Report*, a college's selectivity and yield are two statistics used to determine college rank. Selectivity measures the difficulty of being admitted to a school and yield measures the proportion of students who attend (Fallows, 2001). Every college has a target number of students for acceptance each year. When a college admits a large portion of its entering class through early decision, it can send out fewer offers than it would have to without early decision. Thus, early decision increases a college's yield and selectivity, potentially moving the college higher in the U.S. News rankings. Many argue that colleges who use early decision mainly to increase their rankings are performing a great disservice to students.

Cornell professor Ronald Ehrenberg, who has studied the controversy surrounding college rankings, argues that "It is reasonable to suggest that we would be better off as a society if institutions limited the number of students that they enroll through the early-decision process" (Ehrenberg, 2000, p. 90). Many colleges insist on maintaining their early-decision programs, claiming that they would be at a disadvantage if they ended their programs if their rivals did not do the same (See Ehrenberg, 2000, p. 90; Arenson , 2001, p. D1).

***Ending Early-Decision Programs***

Administrators at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill discontinued their early-decision program in 2002 because an internal analysis showed that the program worked against minority and low-income students. Their study revealed that 82 percent of the early- decision applicants were white compared to 69 percent of the applicants from later applicant pools (Lucido, 2002, p. 28). Also, applicants from the early-decision pool were less likely to apply for need-based aid than applicants in early-action or regular-decision applications (Lucido, 2002, p. 28).

In 2002, Mary Washington College in Virginia decided to end its early-decision program "in response to growing complaints that such programs add unnecessary stress to the increasingly intense process of applying to colleges" ("Va. College," p. A3).

***Defying NACAC Guidelines***

Both Yale and Stanford Universities announced in November of 2002 that they will drop their early-decision programs in 2003, with applications for the 2004-5 academic year. Both universities plan to adopt a nonbinding early-action program that—in defiance of NACAC policy— forbids early applicants to their schools from applying early to other colleges. NACAC policy stipulates that students are free to apply early to multiple colleges, as long as no more than one application is under a binding early-decision program. Yale University President Richard Levin called the NACAC policy "'ill-founded'" and said that "'colleges should be able to set their own policies about admission'" (Young, 2002).

***Conclusion***

College and university administrators across the country are increasingly being called upon to reexamine their early-admission programs and their negative consequences. Though it is too early to determine the fate of the majority of early-decision programs—whether they will be maintained as they are, replaced by early action programs, modified in some new way, or ultimately discarded—there is clearly a movement afoot that advocates change.

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